

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 06 TEL AVIV 001058

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA, NEA/IPA, NEA/PPD

WHITE HOUSE FOR PRESS OFFICE, SIT ROOM
NSC FOR NEA STAFF

JERUSALEM ALSO FOR ICD
LONDON ALSO FOR HKANONA AND POL
PARIS ALSO FOR POL
ROME FOR MFO
E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: IS_KMDR MEDIA REACTION REPORT
SUBJECT: ISRAEL MEDIA REACTION

SUBJECTS COVERED IN THIS REPORT:

Mideast

Key stories in the media:

All media (banners in Ha'aretz and Jerusalem Post) reported that in Brussels on Monday, President Bush called for the establishment of a democratic Palestinian state with territorial contiguity, and that he again urged Israel to freeze settlement activity and help create a Palestinian state. The President was quoted as saying: "A state on scattered territories will not work." Leading media also quoted Bush as saying: "Our shared commitment to democratic progress is being tested in Lebanon -- a once-thriving country that now suffers under the influence of an oppressive neighbor [Syria]." Ha'aretz says that Bush has put the Middle East conflict at the top of Bush's agenda. Jerusalem Post cites an annual Foreign Ministry "intelligence report" presented to the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, according to which by the end of his term, President Bush wants to complete the road map, which is to conclude with the establishment of a Palestinian state.

During the weekend, the key event was the cabinet's setting on Sunday of the date of the evacuation of the settlements for July 20, by a 17-5 vote. In a separate move, the cabinet voted 20-1 with one abstention to approve the route of the separation fence south of Jerusalem. The implementation of the inclusion of Ariel in the fence has been postponed until further notice

All media reported that Israel released 500 Palestinian prisoners on Monday, and cited the Palestinians' hope that more will be freed.

Israel Radio reported that Palestinian PM Ahmed Qurei will present his new government to the Palestinian Legislative Council today. The media had reported on the difficulties faced by Qurei in his task of assigning cabinet positions over the past few days.

Jerusalem Post quoted Israeli military and government officials as saying Monday that Israel must be prepared to carry out an air strike against Iran's nuclear program, although it does not expect a nuclear strike from Iran.

Ha'aretz reported that Minister for Diaspora Affairs Natan Sharansky's book "The Case for Democracy: The Power of Freedom to Overcome Tyranny," has gathered popularity among the American public and leaders, especially since President Bush mentioned it in his State of the Union Address. The newspaper also says that the book is causing concern in Egypt.

On Monday, Ha'aretz reported that two more mainline Protestant denominations -- the United Church of Christ (UCC) and Disciples of Christ -- are now weighing divestment proposals aimed at pressuring Israel to withdraw from the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

In an interview with the Knesset TV Channel last night, former PM Ehud Barak called the Sharon family "corrupt to the core." Barak also said that the disengagement plan is the result of a military failure, and not a calculated strategic move. He also lambasted Labor Party leaders for following Sharon in a servile manner.

Mideast:

Summary:

Conservative, independent Jerusalem Post editorialized: "Bush's running argument with Europe is over which comes first, freedom or peace? In Brussels, he came very, almost disturbingly, far in Europe's direction."

Senior columnist Nahum Barnea wrote on page one of mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot: "Sharon has not become a dove. He has remained what he always was: a pragmatic hawk. But now he is flying high."

Diplomatic correspondent Ben Caspit wrote in popular, pluralist Maariv: "Sunday was Sharon's defining day in the history of the State of Israel. From now on, no longer Sharon-Lebanon, no more Sharon-disaster."

Chief Economic Editor and senior columnist Sever Plotker wrote in an editorial of Yediot Aharonot: "The dovish Left rejects the idea of a [national] referendum [on the disengagement plan] with gusto. But the Left is wrong."

Senior columnist Haggai Huberman wrote on page one of nationalist, Orthodox Hatzofe: "A state that stands atop foundations of lies and cheating has no right to exist."

Arab affairs commentator Danny Rubinstein wrote in independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz: "There's a desire for some peace and quiet in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.... But there are limits to this weariness, and the seeds of trouble can be seen in the field."

Block Quotes:

I. "Bush's Olive Branch"

Conservative, independent Jerusalem Post editorialized (February 22): "Bush's running argument with Europe is over which comes first, freedom or peace? In Brussels, he came very, almost disturbingly, far in Europe's direction. Bush began his description of the 'new era of trans-Atlantic unity' with this: 'Our greatest opportunity and immediate goal is peace in the Middle East a settlement of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is now within reach.' He laid out, in some detail, the two-state goal and the responsibilities of all the parties. Arab states must stop incitement, 'cut off public and private funding for terrorism' and 'establish normal relations with Israel.' Palestinians must not just 'confront and dismantle' terrorist groups, but build a true democracy. And Israel must 'freeze settlements' and ensure 'contiguous territory' for the new Palestinian state. Bush even signed on to the very European notion that such peacemaking is a 'strategic interest' because it will 'remove an unsettled grievance that is used to stir hatred and violence across the Middle East.' This is close to heresy for a president who continues to insist that it is Arab tyranny, not any 'grievance,' that is the font of regional aggression.... We can but hope that Europe realizes that it has nothing to gain from spurning Bush's olive branch. The revolution in Bush's own foreign policy is only deepening."

II. "Rook for a Queen"

Senior columnist Nahum Barnea wrote on page one of mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot (February 21): "If the country were a chessboard, one could say that Sharon sacrificed a rook on Sunday to protect the queen.... All of Israel's prime ministers in the past 30 years have been willing to give up territories in exchange for something -- a peace agreement, time, quiet, U.S. support. Sharon is following in their footsteps. In several ways he is the first: he is the first to agree to evacuate settlements within the Land of Israel; he is the first to give up territories without an agreement; but also the first to receive U.S. support for establishing facts over the Green Line. This is the main point: Sharon believes that by his initiative he is delaying for years, perhaps permanently, the withdrawal from all of the territories. His tactics have changed, but the plan has remained the same plan: to reach a stable arrangement that will leave a large portion, up to 40 percent of the area of the West Bank, in Israel's hands.... Sharon has not become a dove. He has remained what he always was: a pragmatic hawk. But now he is flying high.... When Sharon announced his plan, Marwan Barghouti was the only Palestinian who viewed it

favorably. He understood what a crisis it would generate in the Israeli right wing. Today he is not the only one. Abu Mazen views it as a means of strengthening the Palestinian Authority. He does not believe in an agreement with Sharon. He believes in an agreement with his successors."

III. "Grand Dream is Over"

Diplomatic correspondent Ben Caspit wrote in popular, pluralist Maariv (February 21): "Then it was Golda Meir and [the late hawkish Labor Party minister] Yisrael Galili who made the decision to bring Jews to settle in the Gaza Strip. On Sunday it was Shimon Peres and [Labor Party Minister] Haim Ramon who were partners to the decision to evacuate them. The connecting link between then and now is Ariel Sharon. Then he was O/C Southern Command, the person who led the tour for Golda and Galili in the field, a tour following which the decision was made. Today he is the prime minister himself, and has made a dramatic, corrective, supplementary U-turn. No longer Jews in Gaza. No longer the greater Israel.... Sunday was Ariel Sharon's most important day as prime minister, and this is said by his own people. Sunday was Sharon's defining day in the history of the State of Israel. From now on, no longer Sharon-Lebanon, no more Sharon-disaster. Sharon is the man who is re-dividing the map of the Land of Israel, who is giving up the dream, returning the empire to its border."

IV. "The Left and the Referendum"

Chief Economic Editor and senior columnist Sever Plotker wrote in an editorial of Yediot Aharonot (February 22): "The dovish Left rejects the idea of a [national] referendum [on the disengagement plan] with gusto. But the Left is wrong. The top echelon of the Likud would stand behind the referendum: Ariel Sharon, Silvan Shalom, Shaul Mofaz and Ehud Olmert, who are at the forefront of support for withdrawal from the territories and for evacuating the settlements there. This is an amazing situation, without precedent, one that the dovish camp must seize as a great treasure. Especially since the 'doves' have nothing to fear from the results of a referendum -- a fear that would have had some basis before Arafat's death. In the latest public opinion polls, the disengagement plan receives the support of two thirds of the Israeli adult population.... The Left should have enthusiastically embraced a referendum now. But it opposes it furiously; this is political blindness, and its price is liable to be very high."

V. "Countdown Begins to End of Zionism and State of Israel"

Senior columnist Haggai Huberman wrote on page one of nationalist, Orthodox Hatzofe (February 21): "The ill feelings felt by the opponents of withdrawal stem mainly from the route that was taken to reach the decision: a route of swindling and lies, fraud and deception along the entire way. A state that stands atop foundations of lies and cheating has no right to exist.... The destruction of one of the most significant components of the Zionist ethos could become an important milestone on the way to the destruction of the entire State of Israel. On Sunday, the government effectively decided to okay a civil war, thus perhaps granting, God forbid, a green light to Israel's destruction."

VI. "The Calm Before the Storm"

Arab affairs commentator Danny Rubinstein wrote in independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz (February 21): "The reason for the few-and-far-between terror attacks in recent weeks is not only the efforts of the new government of Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) and his deals with Hamas and Islamic Jihad, but primarily the public mood in the territories, where people are weary of the hardships of the Intifada. There's a desire for some peace and quiet in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.... But there are limits to this weariness, and the seeds of trouble can be seen in the field. The first is the prisoners' affair. The publication of the list of 500 prisoners whom Israel is about to release (and it doesn't include prisoners from East Jerusalem) was met with protest rallies in the West Bank and Gaza, as well as threats of hunger strikes.... A second seed of trouble is the separation fence, the construction of which is continuing, and the reinforcement and expansion of settlement blocs in the West Bank.... [Abbas] wants a final settlement, and without delay.

In other words, he is insisting, already now, on discussing issues over which it is impossible to reach an agreement -- Jerusalem, the settlement blocs, borders and refugees. Abu Mazen is also saying that the current cease-fire is not the end of the Intifada and that the nonviolent resistance will continue.... Marwan Barghouti estimated (in an interview from prison with Maariv) that Abu Mazen has six months. He knows what he's talking about."

KURTZER